Communication, Dialogue and Philosophy

Claude Mangion

Anyone acquainted with Peter Serracino Inglott's numerous philosophical interests would certainly know of the importance he attributed to language as the central and defining feature of humanity. His views on language can be found in two texts, namely, *Peopled Silence* (1995) and *Beginning Philosophy* (1987). *Peopled Silence* is structured as a textbook and it provides a systematic elaboration of the various aspects studied in the philosophy of language (syntax, semantics, pragmatics and poetics), while *Beginning Philosophy* is, strictly speaking, not about the philosophy of language but provides a philosophical methodology. This text did not receive much attention at the time of its publication, with the notable exception of Mario Vella's critical response, *Reflections in a Canvas Bag* (1989).

This paper will examine some of the issues raised in the early text concerning language, communication and dialogue. Given that language is so important to Serracino Inglott's vision of philosophy in particular, and of life in general, I will start 1. by providing an account of the communicative dimension of language; followed by 2. the reconfiguration of this dimension into dialogue; and 3. conclude with his claim that the method of philosophy consists in the analysis of language. The purpose of this paper is to provide an exposition of Serracino Inglott's views together with a critical analysis.

Human Communication

Given the 'linguistic turn' that has characterized contemporary western philosophy, first within Anglo-American philosophy, and later within Continental philosophy, it should come as no surprise that Serracino Inglott considers the philosophy of language as pivotal to philosophy itself. In *Beginning Philosophy*, it is the pragmatic or communicative dimension of language – as opposed to the syntactical (the ordering of words), semantic (the relationship between language and the world) or the poetic (the literary productions of language) – that is the focus of his interest.Serracino Inglott identifies human linguistic communication as a marker or sign of human identity, i.e., what it is that makes us human, as opposed to other forms of communication, in this case, animals (Serracino Inglott 1987, p.85). He raises two points:1. Human

linguistic communication is vastly different from other non-linguistic forms of communication, and the difference between these two forms of communication is that whereas animals communicate with signs that are given to them by nature, i.e., instinctively, and therefore, restricted in their communicative potential, human linguistic communication is open-ended and therefore allows the creation of an infinite number of sentences, despite being governed by rules (Serracino Inglott 1987, p.118–9).[1] 2. Human linguistic communication opens up possibilities denied to those without language. By virtue of being linguistic animals, humans can pretend to be different sorts of creatures; they can even pretend to be animals (Serracino Inglott 1987, p.82–3). The introduction of pretence is an allusion to J. L. Austin's *How to do things with Words* (1975), where he uses the concept of pretending to mark the difference between language 'proper', i.e., as it is used in everyday life, and the way it is used on stage, i.e., as pretence (Austin 1975, p.22). Serracino Inglott writes, 'For pretending, in word or deed, is one of the forms of "A saying about *Y* to B"' (Serracino Inglott 1987, p.82–3). As he rightly points out, this is not always necessarily a positive feature. Sounding very much like Derrida (1988), he claims that the condition that makes being realistic and pretending possible can be applied to all speech acts: from telling the truth to lying, from complimenting to insulting, from expressing one's sincerity to pretending. When Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver introduced the transmission model of communication (1949), it was primarily intended to account for communication between machines.[2] However, because of its simplicity, it was quickly utilized as a model of both linguistic and non-linguistic communication. Serracino Inglott adopts the transmission model of communication to account for human communication defined as the transmission of a message: 'A and B stand for persons, *x* for signs, and *y* for reference of the signs, i.e., part of the context in which the process of communication is occurring' (Serracino Inglott 1987, p.73). This model emphasizes the role of the senders and receivers of the message, with the meaning of the message as what the speaker intended by the message. The success or failure in communication is predicated upon the reception of the same message by the hearer. The ultimate goal of this model is that of influencing the mental or behavioural state of another person.[3] It has been pointed out that the weakness of the transmission model of communication is that it fails to take into adequate consideration the centrality of the context in communicative exchanges. Although Shannon and Weaver claimed that the transmission model could be used to solve technical, semantic and effectivity problems, the focus of their work could only readily be applied to technical problems. While it is possible to measure the transmission of information – defined as bits of data – within the technical level so as to improve it, the same cannot be said for problems concerning meaning (or

effectivity). The Shannon and Weaver model was not concerned with the meaning of data because it did not take the context into consideration. N. Katherine Hayles (1979) provides an illuminating example:

Suppose, for example, you are in a windowless office and call to ask about the weather. "It's raining," I say. On the other hand, if we are both standing on a street corner, being drenched by a downpour, this same response would have a very different meaning. In the first case, I am telling you something you don't know; in the second, I am being ironic (or perhaps moronic). An information concept that ties information to meaning would have to yield two different values for the two circumstances, even though the message ("It's raining") is the same. (Hayles 1979, p.53)

Serracino Inglott's definition of communication shows his awareness of this weakness by specifying that reference entails 'part of the context in which the process of communication is occurring'(Serracino Inglott 1987, p.73). On his account, the context supplements the sign in that understanding it necessitates an understanding of its context.

But while this addition helps to situate communicative exchanges it raises two difficulties:

1. It suggests that what constitutes a context is self-evident. As several theorists have argued, the concept of context is not so transparent or obvious as many would like to believe: some (Foucault) have focused on institutional contexts (political, religious, academic) and taken into account the dynamics of power involved in the communication that occurs within such sites.[4] Others have focused on the less formal context of everyday life by offering an analysis of the necessary conditions for communicative action (Habermas) or the conditions presupposing speech acts (Searle). And others still have differentiated between the communicative contexts of one-to-one interaction, one-to-many, or many-to-many.[5]

2. It equivocates between two senses of reference. When Serracino Inglott writes that communication entails the use of signs that refer to something, the question is 'what is this something that signs refer to?' The Oxford English Dictionary defines reference as: 'The action or fact of applying words, names, ideas, etc., to an entity; the relation between a word or expression and that which it denotes; the entity or entities denoted by a word or expression, a referent (freq. contrasted with *sense*).' The emphasis is clearly upon the act of denoting, or referring to something, i.e., what the content is about, the 'world'. This account of reference fits in squarely with representational theories of language with propositions representing the world in a one-to-one relationship. The

problem with such models is that they neglect other important purposes of communication, such as self-expression, or persuasion.

However, when he elaborates on the concept of reference, Serracino Inglott does add 'part of the context in which the process of communication is occurring' (Serracino Inglott 1987, p.73) This sense of reference is different from the sense employed earlier: it is not what signs refer to, or are about, but the site of their production. The emphasis here is on communication as belonging to a context such that a communicative exchange can be partially understood by reference to the context of its production. In effect, the context is the frame within which the communicative message can be partly – and not completely – understood. There is therefore an equivocation in Serracino Inglott's use of the concept of reference: on the one hand, it is used in an 'external' sense with signs representing and referring to the world, while on the other hand, it is also being used 'internally' to refer to the context that produces signs in the communicative exchange.

At this stage, I want to supplement Serracino Inglott's transmission model of communication with James Carey's celebrated distinction between communication as transmission and communication as ritual. In *Communication as Culture* (2009), Carey argues that the two aforementioned models of communication could be found in 19th century American culture. However, on account of the innovations in technology, the transmission view of communication edged out the ritual model and has dominated theories of communication. This domination continues to be pervasive in contemporary society where, to this day, it is the lexicon of this model – 'sending', 'receiving', 'transmitting', 'imparting' – that is constantly being reiterated. Originally this concept of communication included both the transportation of people or goods and the imparting of information. In this formulation, power and control could be exercized over large distances in relatively quick time. The introduction of the telegraph re-configured communication so that the concept no longer included that of people or goods but solely of information. Despite this reconfiguration, communication still remained a process 'whereby messages [were] transmitted and distributed in space for the control of distance and people' (Carey 2009, p.19).

While the overcoming of distance is the prerogative of the transmission model, with the ritual account the temporal dimension is accentuated. The latter confirms and consolidates the identity of the community over time as it re-iterates the shared beliefs of the community. This is why the concepts subsumed under the ritual model of communication – 'sharing', 'participation', 'association', etc. – are associated with those of communication as 'community' and 'communion'.

The concept of ritual is derived from the domain of religion, in particular, from the religion that emphasizes praying, changing and ceremony – as opposed to sermon, instruction and admonition. Whether religious or not, the purpose of ritual remains that of providing a meaningful backdrop, i.e., a cultural basis within which human action can take place. In a very obvious sense, a culture sets the boundaries for what is meaningful and permitted within a community. Carey compares the two models of communication as these are applied to the analysis of newspapers. With the transmission view of communication the newspaper functions as a tool that transmits information, entertainment (or both) across large distances. The questions that arise in studies on newspapers concern their 'effects' upon audiences, whether they help 'integrate' society, whether they 'promote' personalities. The analysis conducted in the search for answers to these questions are typically 'mechanical'. On the other hand, when applying the ritual view of communication to newspapers, different questions are asked. A ritualistic analysis attempts to understand a newspaper's 'presentation of reality' with the various forces engaged in conflict. Carey writes, '[t]he mode here is not that of information acquisition, though such acquisition occurs, but of dramatic action in which the reader joins a world of contending forces as an observer at a play' (Carey 2009, p.17).

However, while Carey argues for the ritual model of communication, he does not deny the continuing role of the transmission model, but argues that it should be embedded within the broader concept of the ritual. My purpose here has been to show that it is only by re-configuring communication in the manner of Carey, that Serracino Inglott's undeveloped claim that 'fulfillment cannot be achieved except when communication flows into communion' (Serracino Inglott 1987, p.94) can be attained.

Philosophy as Dialogue

Serracino Inglott's model of communication introduces the concept of feedback as inherent to the communicative process. And given that his model of communication privileges speech as the medium of exchange, feedback is configured as a dialogical exchange (Serracino Inglott 1987, p.71). However, it should be pointed out that while Serracino Inglott favours dialogue as a model of human communication, he further adds that it is only 'one basic kind' of communication, and that cannot even be considered as the only type of human communication. In other words, he acknowledges the various modes of non-verbal communication, human

(gestural, bodily, proxemic) and non-human (as in the case of animals and machines or computers).[6]

This qualification comes across as strained in that the text as a whole emphasizes the centrality of language as a way to understanding human existence. It would not be an exaggeration to say that Serracino Inglott accepts an essentialist definition of humanity as linguistic animals with dialogue as the actualization of their innate linguistic capabilities. Whatever the case may be, even if dialogue is only one out of the many forms of communication possible to humans, it is certainly true both that the other forms of communication are linguistically mediated and that it still seems to have a privileged position when accounting for human communication.

Not everyone agrees with the valourization of dialogue as central to an understanding of human communication. A case in point is Durham Peters, who, in 'Communication as Dissemination' (2006) argues for a re-configuration of communication theory away from its bias towards human communication, and specifically, towards the idealization of dialogue. Instead, he proposes a model of communication as dissemination that is more inclusive (human and non-human) in scope.

Peters 'downplays exchange or reciprocity as the defining criterion of communication' (Peters 2006, p.212) and theorizes dissemination as the 'scattering' of meaning. Communicative acts might be sent but whether, and by whom, they are received is a question of probability rather than of certainty as feedback theories seem to assume. While the concept of feedback fits in well with theories that explain communication between machines, reciprocity or reciprocal exchange is favored by those interested in human communication, especially when it is framed as dialogical exchange. However, Peters reminds us that '[f]ace-to-face speech genres are not always dialogical – think of interrogations or scolding' (Peters 2006, p.212). It is mistaken, therefore, on his account, to assume that dialogue is the model of human communication. And while it is valourized by certain philosophers, it is grounded in the assumption that speakers and hearers possess a 'stable ego-identity' or 'integrated egos'. The dialogical model assumes two solitary and fully developed 'poles' of communication. Dissemination, 'in contrast, models communication for creatures that emit weak, pathetic signals – infants, pets, the dead, most of us, most of the time' (Peters 2006, p.218).

Given the centrality of language to human existence, Serracino Inglott argues that the starting point of philosophy should be the analysis of language.[7] This claim is justified on the ground that there is a distinction between first and second order subjects. A first order subject is one that

involves an action or a doing (an artist painting or a surgeon operating), while a second order subject (philosophy) involves an examination of the meaning and value of those actions ('what is art?' or 'what is life?'). The first and second order distinction is also applied to linguistic actions: philosophical analysis occurs when the use of dialogue in everyday communication is suspended and the focus shifts to the way language is being used to communicate a meaning. The starting point of philosophy entails a consideration of 'what it is to say something about something to someone' (Serracino Inglott 1987, p.72). This, in short, is the point of departure for anyone wishing to engage in philosophical reflection.

However, dialogue is transformed into a philosophical practice with the introduction of questioning (Serracino Inglott, 1987, p.71). The notion of the philosopher as persistently asking questions is probably engrained in the mind of the general public, but one should differentiate between this notion of asking questions, and the view Serracino Inglott is arguing for.

The first approach is that of, for example, Socrates who asked questions in order to arrive at a definition of a particular concept (for example, the concept of love in the *Symposium*). Thus, for Socrates, doing philosophy entailed answering the question, 'what is x (say, love)?' because by finding the right definition one identified the necessary qualities of the concept. A more contemporary view of the concept of dialogue or conversation as structured along the 'logic of question and answer' is H. G. Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics. While hermeneutics has been traditionally associated with textual interpretation, Gadamer argues (following Heidegger's cue) that all human understanding is interpretative and that interpretation should involve the horizon of the interpreter and the horizon of the other. He frames this interaction as a process of question and answer that produces a new interpretation, or what he calls a 'fusion of horizons'.

The second approach advocated by Serracino Inglott and the branch of analytic philosophy that he subscribed to involved asking questions about the way words are used in everyday life. When he writes that philosophy is a 'dialogue about dialogue' it is clear that he considers the starting point of philosophy as that of linguistic analysis, an approach indebted to J. L. Austin, who in 'A Plea for Excuses' (Austin 1979, pp.175–204), argued that philosophers should examine 'what we should say when, and so why and what we should mean by it.' Serracino Inglott justifies his choice of philosophical method on the grounds that if it is language that makes us uniquely human, then asking questions about our everyday language use should be the starting point of philosophy. But as he is at pains to point out, philosophy is not '*just* about words'

(Serracino Inglott 1987, p.56): the point of linguistic analysis is to enable us to live fuller and more meaningful lives since our understanding of what is at stake is clearer.

However, while asking questions is a necessary condition for philosophical practice, it is evidently not a sufficient one. Clearly, one can ask about the weather or someone's health, without being interested in a philosophical analysis of the weather or health. Serracino Inglott supplements dialogical questioning with an overview of what he considers the content or subject matter of philosophy, an overview that is reductive and derived from the history of philosophy. These areas include: the study of language itself, i.e., meta-language, the logical consistency and foundations of the natural sciences, the limits of the natural sciences and the possibility of talking about those domains that go beyond the natural sciences, metaphysics, ethics (including politics as a branch of ethics), and the history of philosophy (Serracino Inglott 1987, p. 53–7).

Serracino Inglott shows an overriding concern with the limits or boundaries, not only of the natural sciences, but also of philosophy. The limits of what can be philosophically spoken about point indirectly to the other of philosophy. Utilizing Wittgenstein's concept of language games, Serracino Inglott argues that the limitations of one language game might be supplemented by opening up to another language game. The limitations to the questions that philosophy can answer might lead to the natural sciences.

What are the limitations of philosophy that Serracino Inglott figuratively calls, 'monsters'? There are two and they are both related to the functioning of language as a medium for communication:

1.   Externally: the 'monsters' here are death and individuality. It is worth recalling that for the ancient Greeks, given that a 'proper' language had to be able to represent world rationally, then there was no place for the 'monsters' of death and individuality since the language of philosophy or of science were unable to explain them rationally (Serracino Inglott 1987, p.79). It would seem that what philosophy and the natural sciences have in common is an inability to explain the phenomenon of death as a necessary accident and the phenomenon of the person as a universal singularity. However, it is the inexplicability of death that receives sustained treatment in *Beginning Philosophy*, and Serracino Inglott argues that both i. the inability of the natural sciences to explain the 'monstrosity' of death shows their limitations; and ii. the inability of philosophy to explain the limits of the natural sciences (given philosophy's role as a second-order discipline) is a sign that perhaps other languages – of myth or religion – might be able to provide a better

understanding of these 'monsters' (Serracino Inglott 1987, p.80). Faced with these phenomena, philosophy and the natural sciences are reaching the limits of their respective languages.

2.   Internally: the internal monsters are those features that are an inherent part of language as a tool for communication but which can generate paradoxes or contradictions. As a result they prevent communication – defined in terms of the successful transmission of a message from A to B – from being realized. Serracino Inglott lists several of these well known paradoxes (Serracino Inglott 1987, pp.98–114) but despite these 'threats' to dialogue as a communicative medium he provides rational solutions for them.

There is, therefore, an asymmetry in the relationship between philosophy and what the natural sciences can communicate about, and these 'monsters'. On the one hand, the external 'monsters' of death and individuality exceed the limits of philosophy and the natural sciences reducing them to silence, while on the other hand, the internal 'monsters' can be resolved rationally but their presence is an inherent part of the linguistic communicative system.[8]

A number of objections can be raised against Serracino Inglott's valourization of philosophy as dialogue. This image of philosophy as a face-to-face dialogue between two persons examining instances of everyday language use is a romanticized idealization of philosophy. For a start, this view entails what is known as a 'performative contradiction' in that *Beginning Philosophy* is a written text suggesting that philosophy should be dialogical. In other words, what is being said and what is being done are opposed to each other. In addition, if one wanted to engage in conceptual analysis by examining instances of everyday language use, it would be perfectly possible to do so without dialogue. In fact, most academic philosophy is written and published, and when it is constructed in a dialogue form it has the feeling of being contrived and artificial.

One possible response to this objection is that the word 'dialogue' is being used 'figuratively' in a fashion similar to the way Gadamer uses it in *Truth and Method* (1989), i.e., to imaginatively reconstruct the voice of the other. The thesis he is proposing is that textual interpretation involves allowing the text to have a voice, because it still (especially if it is a classical text) has something to teach us. By re-asserting the role of the text as a crucial 'pole' in the process of interpretation, Gadamer counters the prevailing tendency in contemporary culture to focus solely on the subjective pole of interpretation. While the rejection of subjectivism is something, I think, Serracino Inglott would support, it is not the issue

in his valourization of dialogue as the speech genre most suited to philosophy.

It would seem that the reasons for this valourization are similar to some of the reasons that Socrates offers for the defense of speech in the *Phaedrus*, a defense that is subjected to Derrida's deconstructive critique in *Dissemination* (1981). Utilizing Derrida's insights one might argue that Serracino Inglott's defence of the dialogue is grounded in the 'metaphysics of presence' where face-to-face interaction entails the presence of the two speakers who can respond ('feedback) to each other's questions and answers with the dialogue reaching an end when the truth is reached. A Derridean critique of dialogue as presence reveals that the presence that is expressed in dialogical interaction is actually made possible by absence, a feature that is attributed to writing. In other words, the conditions that make speech possible are the same as the conditions that make writing possible: both are marked by difference and absence. Derrida concludes that dialogue is an effect of, or product of, a generalized form of writing (i.e., grammatology), that accounts for all forms of communication.

From this short exposition of Serracino Inglott's views on communication, dialogue and philosophy, it is evident that *Beginning Philosophy* serves as a rich platform of ideas that can await further examination. And to do justice to the legacy of Serracino Inglott requires, in my view, approaching these ideas not subserviently, but by combining exposition with critique.

In my analysis of Serracino Inglott's views on communication, dialogue and the method of philosophical analysis, I have first highlighted the centrality of language in his philosophy, and followed this with an exposition and evaluation of the transmission model of communication; in the final part, I elaborated upon and critiqued the idealized model of philosophy as entailing a dialogue about dialogue.

Endnotes

1   See *Peopled Silence*, p.36

2   The chief concern of Shannon and Weaver was with the efficiency of the channels of communication, notably telephone cables and radio waves. They wanted to explain both how to send the maximum amount of information over a channel and how to measure the capacity of a channel.

3   Fiske calls this model the 'process model' and opposes it to the semiotic model that sees communication as the production and exchange of meanings. This model emphasizes the social or communal aspects of communication with a message

generating a meaning in the interaction between texts, producers/readers and the external world.

4 Vella points out that the problem with Serracino Inglott's valourization of context is too abstract, failing to take into account concrete political positions (p.2).

5 G. Thomas Goodnight, 'The Engagements of Communication: Jurgen Habermas on Discourse, Critical Reason, and Controversy', p.92, in *Perspectives on the Philosophy of Communication*.

6 See Umberto Eco's distinction between communication and signification. In *A Theory of Semiotics* argues for a broader conception of communication, a conception that excludes the human as a starting point in the understanding of communication. Eco distinguishes between communication as a process that takes place between machines from communication that occurs when humans intervene, i.e., when meaning is introduced. Two computers communicating do not understand the meaning of what they are doing, but once the human element is introduced communication is transformed into signification.

7 Serracino Inglott writes, 'The SPoPH is the beginning of learning the language of philosophy, beginning to learn how to talk with philosophers, [...]' (p.78).

8 In *Peopled Silence*, Serracino Inglott writes about one type of monster, i.e., paradoxes: '[t]he central importance of the paradox in the philosophy of language is due to its being the prototype of one of the basic, inherent threats to which any rational account of language is heir to [...]'(p.143).